



Never-Ending Painting: An Interview with Shelley Reed

By Amy Rahn

Artsy

June 7 2016

Artist Shelley Reed excerpts small details from Old Master paintings, expanding and re-contextualizing them in her often large-scale black and white paintings. On a recent sunny morning in Brooklyn, Amy Rahn spoke with the artist about the origins and intentions behind her work, the time-traveling potential of representation, and her current exhibition at Sears-Peyton Gallery.

Amy Rahn: What were your early experiences as an artist?

Shelley Reed: After getting a degree in Psychology, I went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to study art, and had unlimited access to the museum. I painted fifteen hours a day, just painting non-stop. I painted with tons of color then.

They teach you how to paint, but then the question becomes *what* to paint. I moved to London and went to museums all the time. I painted a tiny detail from a [George] Stubbs painting; I picked out a tiny detail and made it huge. I limited my palette to monochromes.

That painting was the beginning of what I've been doing for decades—using art history, a limited palette, and thinking about how art history relates to today.

I love to seek out old books, old bookstores, and when I got back to the U.S. I spent hours and hours in the stacks of the library of the Fogg Museum at Harvard, where they have an incredible collection of art history books. Thousands and thousands, and all these images of paintings in black and white.

AR: I'm struck by the fact that you are painting from *representations* of paintings, printed in black and white, and so your paintings excerpt not only the original paintings, but also their reproductions in books.

SR: Yes! The fact of how we often see these paintings in reproduction. I became fascinated with the way that artists, before photography, were trying to paint animals from memory. Sometimes the animals were quite exotic—animals the artists themselves had never seen before. A rhino, for example; one artist would have seen one and then told someone else about it, who would try to paint it, so it was like a game of telephone. The animals from this time before photography are painted naturalistically, but they're also strange—they're partly imaginary. They pass on an idea of knowledge.

In the beginning, I'd take passages of paintings I found reproduced in art history books and isolate them on blank white canvasses, but in the last ten years or so I've been creating mash-ups of isolated images from paintings created around the same time, combining little details of several paintings to create a new narrative or series of narratives.

AR: Has anything surprised you as you've developed these works?

SR: How often these artists used the same images over and over again! Melchior de Hondecoeter painted the same peacock repeatedly. You'll see the same peacock in painting after painting. It's interesting to think why that might be; was it because he was commissioned and it was what the patron wanted? Was it because he could save time and creative energy for other parts of the painting?

Another thing that surprised me is that artists were all borrowing from each other. You'll see part of one painting lifted and placed right into someone else's painting. Now we'd call that "appropriation," but then it seems to have been an accepted practice that wasn't intended primarily as conceptual.

In the 20th century, originality was seen as being so important, but I'm more interested in reusing and reinterpreting what already exists to comment on our own evolution— cultural, political, etc.

The animals I paint aren't stand-ins for human figures, but they are emblematic of our great potential and also of our worst characteristics. They embody both their own histories and what they've been made to signify about human behavior. They suggest open-ended narratives that can be interpreted in many different ways.

AR: Can you talk about the installation of your current works at Sears-Peyton? How does it affect the way viewers might perceive your work?

SR: In an individual large painting, there's something specific happening, but I was interested in what might happen if I brought different scenes from many paintings into a consistent landscape. I wanted to see them bigger, on a wider stage. I conceived of making a continuous landscape by making individual scenes that could be continuously rearranged—that could scale to different spaces, that would invite different arrangements. I wanted to make a landscape that could keep going—a painting that never ends.

AR: Do you envision this never-ending painting in bigger and bigger spaces?

SR: Yes! The individual works are like fragments that can be put together with the possibility of change; if you move the pieces, you create a new narrative. It remains in the tradition of painting, but introduces movement. Movement and re-interpretation are built into the painting. The image isn't static; it is always changeable. The painting can grow like a living thing.

There are hints of human presence in these works—architecture, domestic touches—but these only emphasize human absence. There's an ominous element; are humans a threat to the animals that exist in their absence? The domestic and the wild exist in dangerous proximity. You see animals that were bred to be domestic, and you see animals tearing each other apart. There's a hint of aggression—as if violence could break out at any time. There's a hint of something sinister.

AR: Is there something you want to paint, but haven't yet?

SR: I've been painting for a long time, exploring a specific landscape in a deeper and deeper way. I look forward to seeing how it develops. There's a certain line of art history that I want to explore. By thinking of all the connections between all these past environments, these past images, I'm creating my own world to live in, to walk around in, to experience, to perpetuate.

To return to the show at Sears-Peyton, there's a huge wall of the gallery with a cluster of what you could consider portraits—isolated images from art history, still life images, plants, bottles, fabric, etc. They're all like actors that can appear in bigger paintings in the future. They're character studies; they look right at the viewer. These works engage the viewer as an "other." Each painting is a one-to-one encounter, but they're also a cluster. There are interrelations between them; a tree branch echoes the horns of a stag, predators are beside prey. Their gazes, the way they look right at the viewer, puts the viewer in relation to each piece, and to the whole.

I title my works with the attributions of the source paintings from which they came, so if a viewer knows art history, they can see echoes of paintings they've seen before, but if they're unfamiliar with the reference, there's still a sense of kinship, a relationship with the subject. There's a hint they come from somewhere else.

AR: In a sense, you're working in the heart of the academic tradition—copying from Old Masters. What about that methodology remains so fresh for you, despite its long history?

SR: I've found that the issues that were important back then are still relevant today. It speaks to our existence as cultural and political thinking beings that these works are still so available to us, recognizable to us.

There's something about the realistic image that endures. My work makes use of negative space; in many ways it's abstract, but there's a clarity to the image—a will to communicate across time.

AR: Why do you work in black and white?

SR: I'm simplifying, heading towards complexity via intense simplification. Instead of color being the main thing that attracts a viewer to the work, I distill form and create contrast by simple means. Somehow when you simplify, the whole world opens up.

I believe what my works really address is the universal condition, which is always fraught.

Despite the variety of nature—all the different species—the unifying element is the soul, is life, existence. That's what we share with the animals. I'm looking for that moment of recognition.